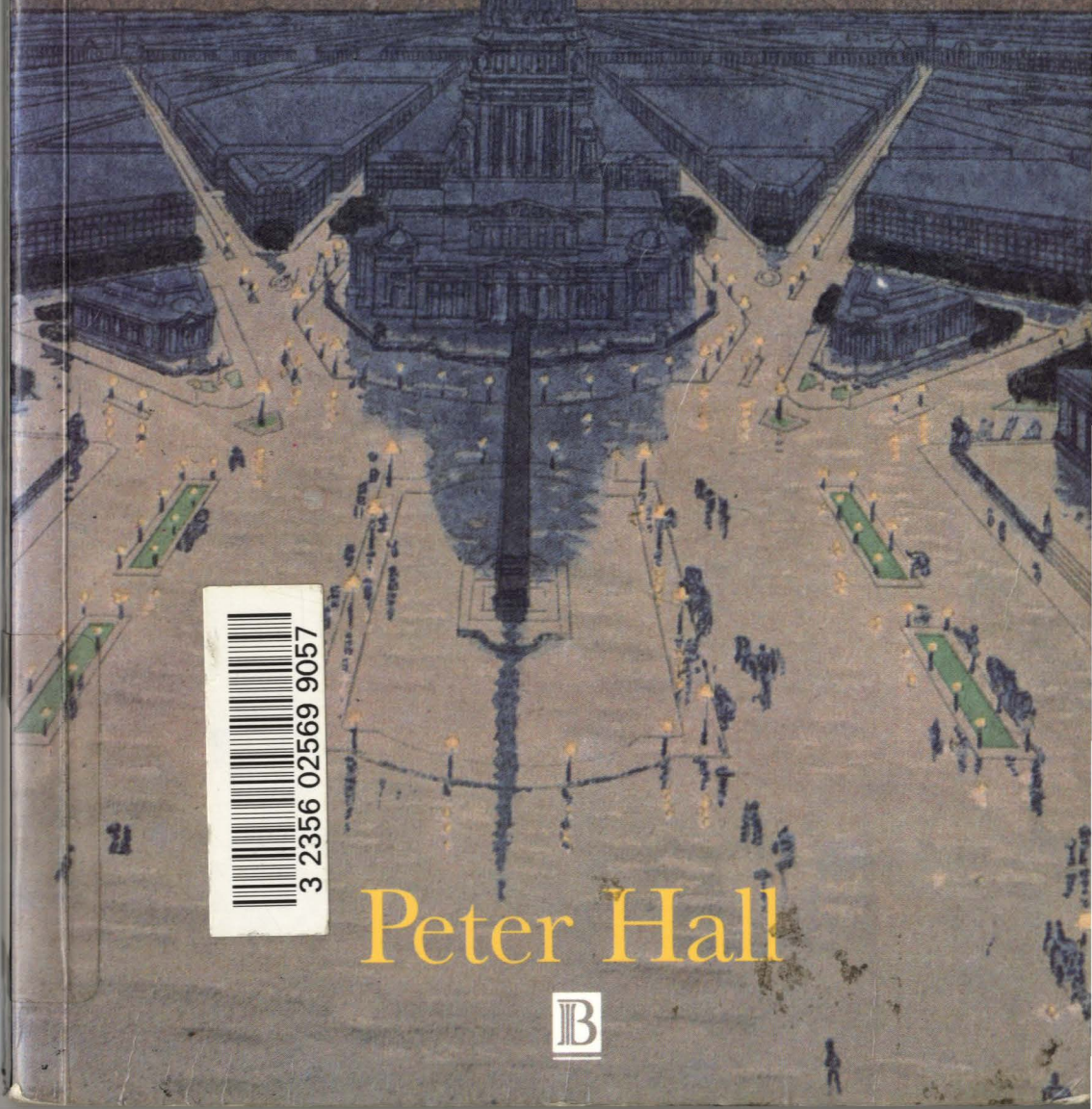


CITIES *of* TOMORROW

Updated Edition



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Peter Hall



does not mean, of course, that we have got nowhere at all: the city of the 1980s is a vastly different, and by any reasonable measure a very much superior, place compared with the city of the 1880s. But it does mean that certain trends seem to reassert themselves; perhaps because, in truth, they never went away.

The City of Dreadful Night

... the great cities of the earth ... have become ... loathsome centres of fornication and covetousness – the smoke of their sin going up into the face of heaven like the furnace of Sodom; and the pollution of it rotting and raging the bones and the souls of the peasant people round them, as if they were each a volcano whose ashes broke out in blains upon man and upon beast.

John Ruskin

Letters to the Clergy on the Lord's Prayer and the Church (1880)

'What people do you mean?' Hyacinth allowed himself to inquire.

'Oh, the upper class, the people who've got all the things.'

'We don't call them the *people*,' observed Hyacinth, reflecting the next instant that his remark was a little primitive.

'I suppose you call them the wretches, the scoundrels!' Rose Muniment suggested, laughing merrily.

'All the things, but not all the brains,' her brother said.

'No indeed, aren't they stupid?' exclaimed her ladyship. 'All the same, I don't think they'd all go abroad.'

'Go abroad?'

'I mean like the French nobles who emigrated so much. They'd stay at home and fight; they'd make more of a fight. I think they'd fight very hard.'

Henry James

The Princess Casamassima (1886)

2

The City of Dreadful Night

Reactions to the Nineteenth-Century Slum City:
London, Paris, Berlin, New York,
1880–1900

In 1880 James Thomson, a poet whose Victorian industriousness never quite compensated for monumental lack of talent, published a collection of doggerel named after its initial offering: an overlong, sub-Dantesque excursion into the underworld. The verse was soon forgotten but the title, *The City of Dreadful Night*, was not. That, perhaps, was because the dreadfulness of the Victorian city, whether by night or by day, soon became one of the major themes of the decade. Thomson's opening lines,

The City is of Night, perchance of Death,
But certainly of Night; for never there
Can come the lucid morning's fragrant breath
After the dewy morning's cold grey air¹

might well have described contemporary London, Liverpool or Manchester. Perhaps W. T. Stead, the sensationalist muck-raking editor of the London evening *Pall Mall Gazette*, consciously or unconsciously recalled the verse when, in an editorial in October 1883, he commented that 'The grim Florentine might have added to the horrors of his vision of hell by a sojourn in a London slum.'

Stead's leader was headed 'IS IT NOT TIME?' In the stentorian tones for which he was already celebrated, he harangued his radical middle-class audience: 'The horrors of the slums', he wrote, represented 'the one great domestic problem which the religion, the humanity, and the statesmanship of England are imperatively summoned to solve.' With a journalist's acute

¹ Thomson 1880, 3.

FIGURE 2.1 *Little Collingwood Street, Bethnal Green, ca. 1900.*
The Victorian 'respectable poor', probably Booth's Class C, in their cruel habitations.



sense of timing, and a special talent for recognising the cause of the hour, he had seized upon a pamphlet just published by a Congregationalist clergyman, Andrew Mearns. As shrewdly promoted by Stead, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* provided a sensation. It had 'immediate and cataclysmic' effect:² it provoked immediate demands for an official inquiry not only from the *Pall Mall Gazette* but from much more conservative papers like *The Times* and *Punch*, and eventually from Queen Victoria herself, leading directly to the appointment of the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes in 1884.³ It proved one of the most influential writings in the whole history of British social reform; Stead later claimed that through its triggering effect on the appointment of the Royal Commission, it was responsible for the birth of modern social legislation.⁴

The Bitter Cry

It was not the first such attempt to shake the smug self-confidence of late Victorian society; but it proved the pin that pricked the bubble. That was because of Mearns's uncanny ability to take his readers inside the slum. Even after a century, the descriptions make the flesh creep and the stomach turn; they have an almost televisual quality. Only extended quotations will convey their impact:

Few who read these pages have any conception of what these pestilential human rookeries are, where tens of thousands are crowded together amidst horrors which call to mind what we have heard of the middle passage of the slave ship. To get to them you have to penetrate courts reeking with poisonous and malodorous gases arising from accumulations of sewage and refuse scattered in all directions and often flowing beneath your feet; courts, many of them which the sun never penetrates, which are never visited by a breath of fresh air, and which rarely know the virtues of a drop of cleansing water. You have to ascend rotten staircases, which threaten to give way beneath every step, and which, in some cases, have already broken down, leaving gaps that imperil the limbs and lives of the unwary. You have to grope your way along dark and filthy passages swarming with vermin. Then, if you are not driven back by the intolerable stench, you may gain admittance to the dens in which these thousands of beings who belong, as much as you, to the race for whom Christ died, herd together.⁵

Now, Mearns brings his bourgeois visitor into the horrific interior of the slum:

Walls and ceiling are black with the accretions of filth which have gathered upon them through long years of neglect. It is exuding through cracks in the

² Wohl, 1977, 206. ³ Wohl, 1970, 31-3; Wohl, 1977, 200, 206.

⁴ Wohl, 1970, 33. ⁵ Mearns, 1883, 4.

boards overhead; it is running down the walls; it is everywhere. What goes by the name of a window is half of it stuffed with rags or covered by boards to keep out wind and rain; the rest is so begrimed and obscured that scarcely can light enter or anything be seen outside.⁶

Furniture might include 'a broken chair, the tottering remains of an old bedstead, or the mere fragment of a table; but more commonly you will find rude substitutes for these things in the shape of rough boards resting upon bricks, an old hamper or box turned upside down, or more frequently still, nothing but rubbish and rags.'⁷

That set the scene for the human horrors within.

Every room in these rotten and reeking tenements houses a family, often two. In one cellar a sanitary inspector reports finding a father, mother, three children, and four pigs! In another a missionary found a man ill with small-pox, his wife just recovering from her eighth confinement, and the children running about half naked and covered with filth. Here are seven people living in one underground kitchen, and a little child lying dead in the same room. Elsewhere is a poor widow, her three children, and a child who has been dead thirteen days. Her husband, who was a cab driver, had shortly before committed suicide.⁸

In another room lived a widow and her six children, including one daughter of twenty-nine, another of twenty-one, and a son of twenty-seven. Another contained father, mother and six children, two of them ill with scarlet fever. In another nine brothers and sisters, from twenty-nine years of age downwards, lived, ate and slept together. In yet another was 'a mother who turns her children into the street in the early evening because she lets the room for immoral purposes until long after midnight, when the poor little wretches creep back again if they have not found some miserable shelter elsewhere.'

The inevitable result was what shocked Mearns's audience as much as the physical horror:

Ask if the men and women living together in these rookeries are married, and your simplicity will cause a smile. Nobody knows. Nobody cares. Nobody expects that they are. In exceptional cases only could your question be answered in the affirmative. Incest is common; and no form of vice and sensuality causes surprise or attracts attention. . . . The only check upon communism in this regard is jealousy and not virtue. The vilest practices are looked upon with the most matter-of-fact indifference. . . . In one street are 35 houses, 32 of which are known to be brothels. In another district are 43 of these houses, and 428 fallen women and girls, many of them not more than 12 years of age.⁹

For the Victorian middle class, this was perhaps the most shocking feature of all.

⁶ Ibid. ⁷ Ibid. ⁸ Ibid. 5 ⁹ Ibid. 7

What was certain, Mearns argued, was that for people so literally destitute, crime did pay. Lingered around Leicester Square were 'several well-known members of the notorious band of "forty thieves", who, often in conspiracy with abandoned women, go out after dark to rob people in Oxford Street, Regent Street, and other thoroughfares.' The arithmetic of crime was inexorable: 'A child seven years old is easily known to make 10s.6d. a week by thieving, but what can he earn by such work as match-box making, for which 2½d. a gross is paid ...? Before he can gain as much as the young thief he must make 36 gross of match-boxes a week, or 1,296 a day. It is needless to say that this is impossible ...'¹⁰

At the root of the problem was the fact that the people of the slum were overwhelmingly, grindingly poor. Women trouser-finishers worked seventeen hours, from 5.00 in the morning to 10.00 at night, for one shilling; for shirt-finishing, the rate was half that. Illness and drink compounded their plight:

Who can imagine the suffering that lies behind a case like the following? A poor woman in an advanced stage of consumption, reduced almost to a skeleton, lives in a single room with a drunken husband and five children. When visited she was eating a few green peas. The children were gone to gather some sticks wherewith a fire might be made to boil four potatoes which were lying on the table, and which would constitute the family dinner for the day. ... In a room in Wych Street, on the third floor, over a marine store dealer's, there was, a short time ago, an inquest as to the death of a little baby. A man, his wife and three children were living in that room. The infant was the second child who had died, poisoned by the foul atmosphere; and this dead baby was cut open in the one room where its parents and brothers lived, ate and slept, because the parish had no mortuary and no room in which post mortems could be performed! No wonder that the jurymen who went to view the body sickened at the frightful exhalations.¹¹

For Mearns,

The child-misery that one beholds is the most heart-rending and appalling element in these discoveries; and of these not the least is the misery inherited from the vice of drunken and dissolute parents, and manifest in the stunted, misshapen, and often loathsome objects that we constantly meet in these localities. ...

Here is one of three years old picking up some dirty pieces of bread and eating them. We go in at a doorway and find a little girl twelve years old. 'Where is your mother?' 'In the madhouse.' 'How long has she been there?' 'Fifteen months.' 'Who looks after you?' The child, who is sitting at an old table making match-boxes, replies, 'I look after my little brothers and sisters as well as I can.'¹²

When Mearns came to 'what it is proposed to do', he was in no doubt: 'We shall be pointed to the fact that without State interference nothing

¹⁰ Ibid. 9 ¹¹ Ibid. 11-12 ¹² Ibid. 13

effectual can be performed upon any large scale. And it is a fact.'¹³ The root of the problem was simple economics. The people were overcrowded because they were poor, and because they were poor they could not afford the obvious remedy: to move out where house room was cheaper:

These wretched people must live somewhere. They cannot afford to go out by train or tram into the suburbs; and how, with their poor emaciated, starved bodies, can they be expected – in addition to working twelve hours or more, for a shilling, or less – to walk three or four miles each way to take and fetch?¹⁴

The British Royal Commission of 1885

This evoked a sympathetic chord. Though some commentators, like the Marquess of Salisbury, thought in terms of charitable trusts and others, like Joseph Chamberlain, thought in terms of local authority action, there was a general willingness to see concerted intervention.¹⁵ Even *The Times*, with evident disapproval, observed that 'it can hardly be doubted by any one who watches the tendencies of the time that *laissez-faire* is practically abandoned and that every piece of state interference will pave the way for another.'¹⁶ And even Salisbury, in a crucially important speech of November 1884, raised the question of state intervention.¹⁷ The appointment of a prestigious Royal Commission, chaired by Sir Charles Wentworth Dilke and including among its members the Prince of Wales, Lord Salisbury and Cardinal Manning, followed. But, while the Commission's report of 1885 abundantly confirmed the nature of the problem, it could reach no unanimous conclusion as to remedy. It concluded definitively,

First, though there was great improvement ... in the condition of the houses of the poor compared with that of 30 years ago, yet the evils of overcrowding, especially in London, were still a public scandal, and were becoming in certain localities more serious than they ever were; second, that there was much legislation designed to meet these evils, yet the existing laws were not put into force, some of them having remained a dead letter from the date when they first found place in the statute book.¹⁸

Abundant evidence confirmed that in London, one family to a room was typical, and that family might number up to eight souls. This was exacerbated by the custom, in the capital, of dividing up houses into one-room tenements, which must then share one water supply and one closet. And, because the front door was seldom shut, at night the staircases and passages might fill up with the ironically titled 'appy dossers': the completely

¹³ Ibid. 14 ¹⁴ Ibid. 15 ¹⁵ Tarn, 1973, 111-12. ¹⁶ cit. Wohl, 1977, 234.

¹⁷ Ibid. 238. ¹⁸ G. B. R. C. Housing, 1885, I. 4.





FIGURE 2.2 *The Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes in session, 1884.* Shaftesbury, centre right, gives evidence on the life styles of the poor; the Prince of Wales, leaning forward centre left, appears aghast.



homeless.¹⁹ Within the rooms, the widespread practice of home work – often noxious, such as rag-picking, sack-making, matchbox-making and rabbit-pulling – made bad conditions worse.²⁰ In the provincial cities, though there were big variations, overall the same problem of overcrowding did not exist as in London.²¹

For some, like the veteran social reformer Lord Shaftesbury, the one-room system was 'physically and morally beyond all description':

I was saying that we dare not tell all we know, and I should be very sorry to go into details of things that I do not know; but I will give an instance of the evil consequences of the one-room system, and this not an instance of the worst kind. This case only happened last year, but it is of frequent occurrence. A friend of mine, who is at the head of a large school, going down one of the back courts saw two children of tender years, 10 or 11 years old, endeavouring to have sexual connection on the pathway. He ran and seized the lad and pulled him off, and the only remark of the lad was, 'Why do you take hold of me?' There are a dozen of them at it down there.' You must perceive that this could not arise from sexual tendencies, and that it must have been bred by imitation of what they saw.²²

But others disagreed; and the Royal Commission concluded that the 'standard of morality . . . is higher than might have been expected.'²³

That perhaps was some small comfort. The remarkable fact was that the average tenement dweller had far less space than that mandated by the Victorian state for those incarcerated in prisons or workhouses. Predictably, mortality levels – especially for children – remained alarmingly high. Those who survived, the Commission calculated, lost an average of twenty days' work a year because they 'get depressed and weary.' And all this was compounded by the fact that 'the warmest apologist for the poorest classes would not assert the general prevalence of cleanly habits among them.'²⁴

The root causes, just as Mearns had shown, were stark poverty and consequent inability to move out. Unskilled London workers like costermongers and hawkers earned a mere 10s. to 12s. a week; dockers averaged only 8s. to 9s.; the average Clerkenwell labourer might bring home 16s. Nearly one half of London families, 46 per cent, had to pay over one quarter of these meagre earnings for rent; and, while rents were rising, wages were not.²⁵ And poverty was compounded by the casual nature of so much low-paid work, including that of their home-working wives; so that 'an enormous proportion of the dwellers in the overcrowded quarters are necessarily compelled to live close to their work, no matter what the price charged or what the condition of the dwelling they inhabit.'²⁶ Middlemen rack-renters, who managed houses on short end-leases, blatantly

¹⁹ G. B. R. C. Housing 1885, I. 7–9. ²⁰ Ibid. I. 11. ²¹ Ibid. I. 8. ²² Ibid. II. 2.

²³ Ibid. I. 13. ²⁴ Ibid. I. 14–15. ²⁵ Ibid. I. 17. ²⁶ Ibid. I. 18.

exploited the housing shortage for all they were worth. And demolitions – for new streets like Charing Cross Road and Shaftesbury Avenue, since London in the 1880s was undergoing a mini-Haussmannization, or for the new Board Schools that followed the 1870 Education Act – had worsened the problem.²⁷

Underlying all this was an incompetent and often corrupt local government system, unable or unwilling to use the powers it had. Outside London, the historic Public Health Act of 1875 had provided the basis for a more effective local government system;²⁸ but in the capital, an archaic and chaotic pattern still ruled. Only two vestries or district boards, out of thirty-eight in all London, had taken any vigorous action. There were hardly any inspectors: Mile End, a poor area, had one to 105,000 people. And those were hardly competent: in one London parish, the assistant inspector was 'formerly something in the jewellery trade', said the vestry clerk, who added 'I don't know that any special training is required. If a man was endowed with good common sense I think that would be about as good a training as he could have.'²⁹

So the Royal Commission's main recommendations, rather than adding new powers, focused on how to ensure that local authorities used existing ones. These embraced the so-called Torrens Act (The Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Act, 1868), which allowed local authorities to build new dwellings for the labouring classes, and the Cross Act (The Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act, 1875) which allowed them to clear large areas of unfit housing and to rehouse the inhabitants, both of which were very largely dead letters. They did, however, say that these local authorities should be able to borrow money from the Treasury at the lowest possible rate of interest that would not bring actual loss to the national exchequer. And, in London, they proposed that the vestries and joint boards should surrender their powers under the housing acts to the Metropolitan Board of Trade.³⁰ The Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1885, which immediately followed, implemented these recommendations. It also extended Lord Shaftesbury's ancient 1851 Lodging Houses Act, redefining these to include separate dwellings and cottages for the working classes: a powerful suggestion that the Victorian parliament would at last countenance municipal socialism in housing.³¹ The problem remained that local authorities would not move; to which, the Royal Commission could only suggest that it was time that the depressed working classes of the cities should begin to show an interest in their plight.³²

²⁷ Ibid. I. 19–21. ²⁸ Ashworth, 1954, 73. ²⁹ R. C. Housing, 1885, I. 22, 33.

³⁰ Ibid. I. 40–1. ³¹ Wohl, 1977, 248. ³² Gaudie, 1974, 289.

Depression, Violence and the Threat of Insurrection

Perhaps, indeed, they would. For the 1884 Reform Act had extended the franchise to a large part of the urban male working class. And this class was just then suffering the effects of a major depression in trade and industry, comparable in its impact with those that followed in the 1930s and 1980s. There was indeed an ominous foretaste of what was to come: the problem, a Royal Commission concluded in 1886, was in part a matter not of the trade cycle, but of a structural weakness in British industry compared with its major international competitors, above all Germany. The Germans were about as good at production as the British; and in the arts of winning and keeping markets they were gaining ground.³³ The Commissioners warned that Britain was taking less trouble 'to discover new markets for our produce, and to maintain a hold upon those which we already possess . . . There is also evidence that in respect of certain classes of products the reputation of our workmanship does not stand so high as it formerly stood.'³⁴ They rejected suggestions that ascribed the cause to 'legislative restrictions on the employment of labour and to the action of the working classes themselves by strikes and similar movements' or 'to the action of trades unions or similar combinations.'³⁵

Whatever the causes, there was no doubt about the effects. During the mid-1880s, throughout the cities and above all throughout London, there was a spirit of cataclysmic, even violent, change in the air. The questions of the hour, Beatrice Webb later wrote, were 'on the one hand, the meaning of the poverty of masses of men; and, on the other, the practicability and desirability of political and industrial democracy as a set-off to, perhaps as a means of redressing, the grievances of a majority of the people.'³⁶ But these discussions were for the intelligentsia: 'it was, in truth, no section of the manual workers that was secreting . . . 'the poison of socialism' . . . Born and bred in chronic destitution and enfeebling disease, the denizens of the slums had sunk into a brutalized apathy. . . .' The ferment, in her recollection forty years later, was within one section of the Victorian governing class; it consisted in 'a new consciousness of sin' which 'was a collective or class consciousness; a growing uneasiness, amounting to conviction, that the industrial organism, which had yielded rent, interest and profit on a stupendous scale, had failed to provide a decent livelihood and tolerable conditions for a majority of the inhabitants of Great Britain.'³⁷ Later historians might doubt that; the predominant emotion, one asserted, was not guilt, but fear. The poor 'were generally pictured as coarse, brutish,

³³ G. B. R. C. *Depression*, 1886, xx. ³⁴ *Ibid.* ³⁵ *Ibid.*, xx, xxi.

³⁶ Webb, 1926, 149. ³⁷ *Ibid.* 154-5.

drunken, and immoral; through years of neglect and complacency they had become an ominous threat to civilization.'³⁸

The reactions often took a heady form. Those apostles of gradualism, the Fabians, whom Beatrice Webb soon joined, produced an early manifesto bearing the clear imprint of George Bernard Shaw, and ending with the stark propositions:

That the established Government has no more right to call itself the State than the smoke of London has to call itself the weather.

That we had rather face a Civil War than such another century of suffering as the present one has been.³⁹

H. M. Hyndman, leader of the Social Democratic Foundation, wrote in the same year that 'Even among the useless men and women who dub themselves 'society', an undercurrent of uneasiness may be detected. The dread word 'Revolution' is sometimes spoken aloud in jest, and more often whispered in all seriousness.'⁴⁰ Hyndman doubted that the ferment was restricted to the middle class; for

. . . books, pamphlets and fly-leaves are finding their way into workshop and attic, which deal with the whole problem from top to bottom. Theories drawn from Dr. Karl Marx's great work on Capital, or from the programme of the Social democrats of Germany and the Collectivists of France, are put forward in cheap and readable form.⁴¹

But Hyndman also drew attention to a phenomenon that few could fail to notice: 'Among the ugliest growths of modern society are the numerous gangs of organized roughs . . . who parade our great cities, and too often, not content with mauling one another, maltreat the peaceful wayfarer.'⁴² In London alone, he claimed, according to the police there were 300,000 members of the 'dangerous classes'.⁴³ No one, Hyndman argued, 'had taken the trouble to analyze the manner in which these people were fostered into their present brutality.'⁴⁴

Some did not even think it worth the trouble. During 1886 and 1887, the respectable citizens of Liverpool began to complain that they were being terrorized by gangs; 'the district from Athol Street to Luton Street' was 'infested by these scoundrels', wrote an indignant correspondent to the local paper in February 1887. The same month the most notorious among them, the High Rip Gang, went on a wild rampage through the streets of Liverpool, indiscriminately attacking men, women and children with knives and slingshot, and stealing from pawnshops. On 20 May the gang, described as 'four rough-looking young men . . . labourers, entered as being imperfectly educated', appeared at the Liverpool Assizes on eight charges of malicious

³⁸ Stedman Jones, 1971, 285. ³⁹ Fabian Society, 1884b, 2. ⁴⁰ Hyndman, 1884, 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 28. ⁴² *Ibid.* 25. ⁴³ *Ibid.* 32. ⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 25.

wounding with intent to do grievous bodily harm, and robbery with violence. The trial judge, Mr Justice John Charles Frederick Sigismund Day, was a mutton-chop-whiskered sexagenarian with a profound distrust of modern penological theories, whose fixed conviction about violent criminals was that they needed a particularly short sharp shock; or, as his son quaintly put it, 'that the only appeal to their reason was through their epidermis.'⁴⁵

Pronouncing that 'with all his experience he has never heard such outrageous conduct narrated as he had this day heard', he ordered the most draconian sentences ever recorded in the courts of Victorian England: as well as terms of hard labour, each of the four was to receive three separate floggings of twenty lashes each. Thus fortified by his one-man attack on the city's crime problem, Mr Day returned to the fray at the November Assizes, where – among seven floggings ordered on one day – he sentenced two men to twenty lashes each for stealing a halfpenny and a plug of tobacco. The respectable citizens, his son later claimed, were eternally in Mr Day's debt, though 'members of philanthropical societies, and some others, denounced the 'flogging judge' as a well-meaning brute, and regarded his method of dealing with criminals as medieval and mistaken.'⁴⁶ In any case, there is no evidence at all that Day's reign of terror had any effect at all on violent crime in Liverpool. The odd fact is, that despite the fears of the citizens, it seems clear that crime in late Victorian England was following a long secular downward trend, albeit punctuated by periodic outbursts of violence such as in the mid-1880s.⁴⁷

The real terror among the middle classes, notwithstanding Beatrice Webb's scepticism, was that the working class would rise in insurrection. And nowhere was this fear greater than in the seat of government. In February 1886, their worst fears were realized. For weeks, unemployed workers and socialist intellectuals had been holding meetings in Trafalgar Square. On Monday, 8 February, a huge meeting, including 'a considerable proportion, larger than usual, of the roughest element'⁴⁸, was met by a force of over 600 police officers. Fearing an attack on Buckingham Palace, they moved into the Mall; the mob, numbering between 3,000 and 5,000 people, instead went on the rampage past the clubs of Pall Mall, into the streets of St James's and Mayfair, breaking windows and looting shops. An official inquiry condemned the Metropolitan Police for inadequate crowd control, and the Commissioner was forced to resign.⁴⁹

The new Commissioner, Sir Charles Warren, was made of sterner stuff. During the autumn of 1887 tension again rose, with huge crowds gathering daily in Hyde Park and Trafalgar Square to hear speeches. Repeated

⁴⁵ *Liverpool Echo*, 20 May 1887; Day, 1916, 120. ⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 121; *Liverpool Daily Post*, 25 Nov 1887. ⁴⁷ Jones, 1982, 119–20, 123, 143. ⁴⁸ G. B. Committee Disturbances, 1886, v.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, *passim*.

clashes with the police took place. *The Times*, which habitually referred to the 'so-called unemployed', called for firm action:

We trust that if these men, or any other of their class, attempt to carry out their threats as they did last year, they will get their deserts, in the form not of a convenient term of imprisonment for a few months, but of hard penal servitude. . . . The only question worth asking is which of the two parties is the stronger – the would-be smashers of windows and wreckers of tradesmen's shops or the guardians of the public peace.⁵⁰

Thus the stage was set. On Sunday, 23 October, a huge crowd gathered in the square, raising the red flag, to hear speeches demanding Sir Charles' dismissal. Just before 3.00 in the afternoon, headed by the red flag, the mob suddenly moved down Whitehall and invaded Westminster Abbey during the service. The resulting scenes resembled the final act of Brecht's *Dreigroschenoper*, which perhaps they inspired. According to *The Times*, 'a large number of boys, youths, and men, many of them of a very dirty appearance' entered as the organ played a voluntary. They mixed with the congregation, 'the more manly [of whom] quietly exercised their influence to restrain the most shameless. . . . The roughs shouted bitter words about 'capitalists', seeming to suppose that all those who were in the Abbey at worship were 'capitalists.' Canon Rowsell tried to argue with them. 'The mob listened quietly.' Just outside, Hyndman spoke: 'he looked forward to the time when the Socialistic flag and motto of "Each for all and all for each" should be placed above that abbey, and they should be inside, preaching the doctrine of revolution.'⁵¹

The demonstrators then returned to the square, where 'from every side of Nelson's column meetings were being addressed', with a huge crowd spilling out across the square and into neighbouring places. The police panicked and had to call in the army to control the crowds; in the mêlée, over 100 people were injured; later, two of the crowd died. Massive and mutual recriminations followed. One indignant correspondent wrote to *The Times* that the meetings were 'an advertisement to all anarchists, here and elsewhere, to flock to the only great capital in the world where they would be tolerated.'⁵² Hyndman wrote with a different view: 'Men and women will not starve any longer. That I, for one, know. The present agitation is quite spontaneous and unorganized.' The editorial view was predictable: 'This capital itself is menaced by riotous mobs, avowing their determination to profit by the example of the party of disorder in Ireland and to extort the concession of their demands by terrorism.'⁵³ Stead's *Pall Mall Gazette* in contrast accused Warren of trying to establish 'police rule': in the Abbey, the interruptions during the service had been the result of overcrowding, and the unemployed had left in perfectly orderly fashion. At Bow Street,

⁵⁰ *The Times*, 15 Oct 1887. ⁵¹ *The Times*, 24 Oct 1887.

⁵² *The Times*, 27 Oct 1887. ⁵³ *The Times*, 24 Oct 1887.

sundry persons were charged; some were jailed, others fined or bound over. Later, R. Cunninghame Graeme, MP, and the Socialist leader John Burns were convicted at the Old Bailey and imprisoned for six weeks; they became popular heroes.⁵⁴

The Booth Survey: The Problem Quantified

Out of the mayhem of these months came at least some rational response. Charles Booth, the Liverpool shipowner, had been inspired by *The Bitter Cry* to go into the East End of London in order to embark on what became the first modern social survey. Aided by an army of able young assistants, including Beatrice Potter, later Webb – who here enjoyed her initiation into academic research – he presented his first results before the Royal Statistical Society in May 1887, and a second paper a year later. According to Booth, the poor of East London numbered some 314,000, or over 35 per cent of the city's population; extending that percentage pro rata, that meant 1,000,000 Londoners in poverty. They could be divided, he said, into four subgroups.

The first, Class A, included a mere 11,000 in the East End, perhaps 50,000 in all London: 1.25 per cent of the population. It 'consists of some (so-called) labourers, loafers, semi-criminals, a proportion of the street sellers, street performers and others.' It included many young people: 'young men who take naturally to loafing; girls who take almost as naturally to the streets'; they led 'a savage life, with vicissitudes of extreme hardship and occasional excess. Their food is of the coarsest description, and their only luxury is drink.'⁵⁵ Booth was sanguine that this group was so small: 'The hordes of barbarians of whom we have heard who, coming forth from their slums, will some day overwhelm modern civilisation, do not exist. The barbarians are a very small and decreasing percentage.'⁵⁶ But it still represented an irreducible problem: 'They render no useful service and create no wealth; they oftener destroy it. They degrade whatever they touch, and as individuals are almost incapable of improvement. . . . It is much to be hoped that this class may become less hereditary in its character.'⁵⁷

These, then, were the classic Victorian Undeserving Poor: the raw material of the mob, the perpetual nightmare of the respectable classes, albeit much smaller than Hyndman and others had claimed. The second group, Class B, were, however, much more of a problem. For one thing, they were a much bigger group: 100,000 in the East End, perhaps 300,000 in London as a whole, over 11 per cent of the city's population. Booth

⁵⁴ Ensor, 1936, 180–1. ⁵⁵ Booth, 1887, 334–5.

⁵⁶ Booth, 1888, 305. ⁵⁷ Booth, 1887, 334–5.

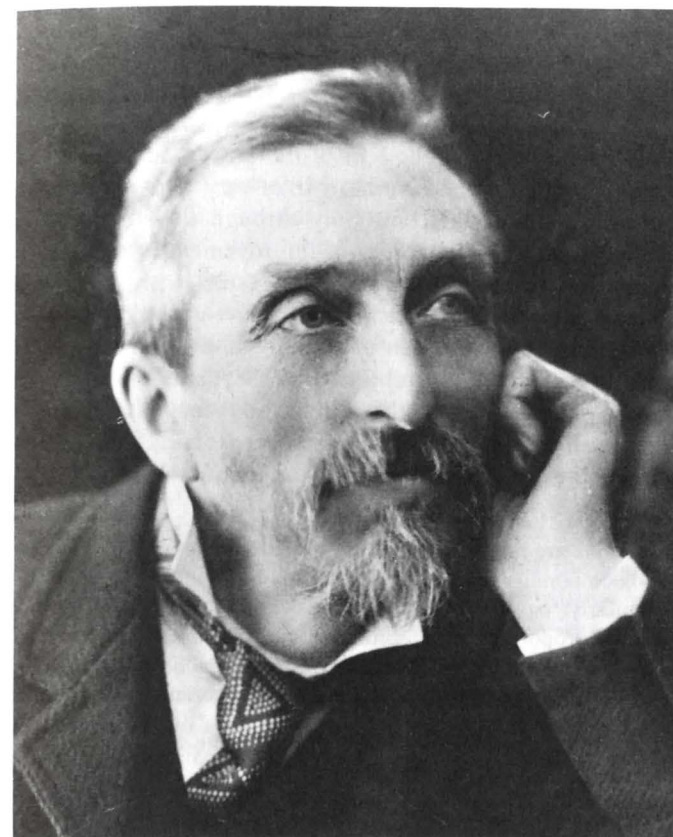


FIGURE 2.3 Charles Booth.

The shipowner-turned-sociologist, presumably intent on the results of his survey; perhaps it was the young Beatrice Potter who was reporting.

described them as being 'in chronic want': 'These people, *as a class*,' he wrote, 'are shiftless, hand-to-mouth, pleasure loving, and always poor; to work when they like and play when they like is their ideal.'⁵⁸ Their problem was the casual nature of their earnings. They included relatively large numbers of widows, unmarried women, young persons and children. Booth felt that the solution to the problem of poverty was 'the entire removal of this class out of the daily struggle for existence,' since 'they are a constant burthen to the State. . . . Their presence in our cities creates a costly and often unavailing struggle to raise the standard of life and health.'⁵⁹

Immediately above them came Class C, numbering some 74,000 people in the East End or 250,000 in London as a whole: over 8 per cent of the

⁵⁸ Ibid. 329. ⁵⁹ Booth, 1888, 299.

total. They formed 'a pitiable class, consisting largely of struggling, suffering, hopeless people . . . the victims of competition, and on them falls with particular severity the weight of recurrent depressions of trade.'⁶⁰ Their basic problem was the irregular nature of their earnings. And finally Class D, those who suffered from regular but low earnings, included about 129,000 East Enders or 14.5 per cent of the city's population; say 400,000 in London as a whole. They 'live hard lives very patiently', and the hope for their improvement could come only through their children, since 'for the class as a whole the probability of improvement is remote.'⁶¹

One group who read these early Booth results with particular interest was the Fabian Society, in which the patient fact-grubbing of Sidney Webb was now married to the acid pen of Bernard Shaw. The definitive Fabian classic, *Facts for Socialists*, first published in 1887, was repeatedly reprinted, selling 70,000 copies within eight years; two years later came a sequel, *Facts for Londoners*. 'In London', the researchers found, 'one person in every five will die in the workhouse, hospital, or lunatic asylum.'⁶²

Of the 1,000,000 Londoners estimated by Mr. Booth to be in poverty . . . practically none are housed as well as a provident man provides for his horse. These 200,000 families, earning not more than a guinea a week . . . and that often irregularly, pay from 3s. to 7s. per week for filthy slum tenements of which a large proportion are absolutely 'unfit for habitation', even according to the lax standards of existing sanitary officers. London needs the rebuilding of at least 400,000 rooms to house its poorest citizens.⁶³

The results were predictable: while the average age of death among the nobility, gentry, and professional class of England and Wales was fifty-five, among the artisan classes of Lambeth it was twenty-nine; the infantile death rate in Bethnal Green was double that in Belgravia.⁶⁴

The heart of the problem, as contemporaries saw it, was housing. 'The housing problem was central to the social problem of London in the 1880s'; 'from 1883 onwards the quarterly journals and the press were full of warnings of the necessity of immediate reform to ward off the impending revolutionary threat.'⁶⁵ There was but one remedy, in the Fabian view: 'The re-housing of London's poor can only be adequately dealt with by London's collective power.'⁶⁶ Between the first and second editions of the *Facts* pamphlet, that statement had become much more realistic and practicable; for, following the recommendation of the Royal Commission on Housing, the Local Government Act of 1888 had transferred the responsibilities of the Metropolitan Board of Works to a new democratically elected body, the London County Council. And, in 1890, yet another

⁶⁰ Booth, 1887, 332. ⁶¹ Ibid. 332.

⁶² Fabian Society, 1889, 7; cf. Fabian Society, 1887, 15.

⁶³ Fabian Society, 1889, 25. ⁶⁴ Fabian Society, 1887, 14.

⁶⁵ Stedman Jones, 1971, 217, 290. ⁶⁶ Fabian Society, 1889, 28.

Housing of the Working Classes Act did what the 1885 Act had failed to do: in Part III, it provided for the redevelopment of large areas, with compulsory purchase if needs be, for the purpose of building working-class lodging houses, defined to include 'separate houses or cottages for the working classes, whether containing one or several tenements.'⁶⁷

Though the Act was actually contradictory on its attitude to local authority ownership and management of housing – Part I discouraged it, Part III allowed if it did not encourage it – the new LCC seized on the opportunity it presented, by immediately establishing a Housing of the Working Classes Committee.⁶⁸ In 1894 borrowing powers were extended to the relevant section of the Act; in 1900 local authorities, including the LCC and the new London boroughs which had replaced the vestries by a London Government Act the previous year, were enabled to buy land outside their own boundaries to implement this section of the 1890 Act.⁶⁹

The Slum City in Europe

London, rather than any provincial British city, was the stage on which most of this drama was played out. But that was because – as the Royal Commission recognized in 1885 – the housing problem was so much worse there; and that, in large measure, was a simple measure of London's size. With its 5.6 million people at the start of the 1890s, no other British urban area could compete with it; housing densities, land rents, transportation problems, competition for space were all bound to be so much more acute there.

Even on the international scale, against the Paris region's 4.1 million and Greater Berlin's 1.6 million, London was unchallengeably the greatest city in Europe and even the world.⁷⁰ But these other cities, being relatively smaller and denser, had their own competitive horror stories to offer. In Paris the historic city's 2.45 million people, in 1891, lived at a density twice that of the LCC area. Bertillon concluded at that date that 14 per cent of the Paris poor, 330,000, lived in overcrowded dwellings; the poor were even worse housed than in London. Sellier calculated in 1911 that the total was still 216,000, with another 85,000 in the suburbs, living at two or more per room.⁷¹ There, too, legislation – in 1894, 1906 and 1912 – had allowed the construction of low-cost housing for the working classes, and the last provided for local authorities to establish offices to build and manage such housing, backed by state money. Yet down to 1914, only 10,000 such dwellings had been built in the Paris region, an

⁶⁷ Wohl, 1977, 252. ⁶⁸ Tarn, 1973, 122; Gauldie, 1974, 294–5.

⁶⁹ Tarn, 1973, 124, 127. ⁷⁰ Mitchell, 1975, 76–8.

⁷¹ Sellier, 1927, 1–2; Bastié, 1964, 190.

FIGURE 2.4 *Berlin Mietskasernen.*

In Berlin, a model housing design brings congestion and misery.

unimpressive total compared with the LCC achievement.⁷² The stark fact was that neither the city nor the state had the money for slum clearance: other huge public works – building schools and the Sorbonne in the 1880s and 1890s, building the Métro in the decade 1900–10 – took priority.⁷³

Berlin, where the population was growing at almost American speed – a near-doubling in twenty years, from 1.9 million in 1890 to 3.7 million in 1910 – was, like Paris, an extraordinarily compact, and therefore congested, city: its growth was accommodated in densely packed five-storey ‘rental barracks’ around courtyards as narrow as 15 feet wide, the minimum necessary to bring in fire-fighting equipment. This kind of development, apparently first developed by Frederick the Great to house soldiers’ families, became universal as a result of the city plan of Police-President James Hobrecht, in 1858; apparently designed to achieve social integration, with rich and poor in the same block, it simply produced miserable congestion, and the pattern even spread to new suburban development after a change in regulations there in the 1890s;⁷⁴ speculation, guided by the plan and

⁷² Bastié, 1964, 192; Sutcliffe, 1970, 258; Evenson, 1979, 218.

⁷³ Morizet, 1932, 332; Bastié, 1964, 196; Sutcliffe, 1970, 327–8.

⁷⁴ Voigt, 1901, 126, 129; Hegemann, 1930, 170; Peltz-Dreckmann, 1978, 21; Niethammer, 1981, 146–7.

fuelled by an exceptionally favourable mortgage system, did the rest.⁷⁵

The result, according to the calculations of the British planning pioneer T. C. Horsfall in 1903, was that while in London in 1891 the average number of inhabitants to a building was 7.6, in Berlin it was 52.6;⁷⁶ as late as 1916, no less than 79 per cent of all dwellings had only one or two heatable rooms.⁷⁷ And Berliners paid much more to rent their apartments than did their equivalents in Hamburg or Munich – the poor, ironically, paying the highest proportions of their wages.⁷⁸ Further, though Germany was faster to electrify its tram systems than Britain, in Berlin the private tram companies did not serve as a means of outward movement in the same way as the LCC, and underground railway development was held up by legal wrangles.⁷⁹ Patrick Abercrombie, the British planner, visiting Berlin just before World War One, was intrigued by the contrast with London: ‘Berlin is the most compact city in Europe; as she grows she does not straggle out with small roads and peddling suburban houses, but slowly pushes her wide town streets and colossal tenement blocks over the open country, turning it at one stroke into full-blown city.’⁸⁰

There was an interesting reaction to growth and overcrowding in the European capitals: both in London and in Berlin, fears began to develop that the city population was in some way biologically unfit. Around 1900, recruitment for the South African War exposed the fact that out of 11,000 young men in Manchester, 8,000 were rejected and only 1,000 were fit for regular service. Later, in World War One, the Verney Commission reassessed that the physique of the urban part of Britain tended to deteriorate, and was maintained only by recruitment from the countryside.⁸¹ Similarly, in Berlin, only 42 per cent of Berliners were found fit for army service in 1913, against 66 per cent of those from rural areas.⁸²

From this soon followed the argument that city people – and eventually, the whole population – would fail to reproduce itself, an argument first used by Georg Hansen in his book *Die drei Bevölkerungstufen* in the 1890s, and developed by Oswald Spengler in his classic *The Decline of the West*, in 1918: ‘Now the giant city sucks the country dry, insatiably and incessantly demanding and devouring fresh streams of men, till it wearies and dies in the midst of an almost uninhabited waste of country.’⁸³ But in both countries, there were wider fears. Charles Masterman, the Liberal MP, suggested in his book *The Heart of the Empire* (1901) that the Londoner was unstable:

The England of the past was an England of reserved, silent men, dispersed in small towns, villages and country houses. . . . The problem of the coming

⁷⁵ Hegemann, 1930, 302, 317; Grote, 1974, 14; Hecker, 1974, 274.

⁷⁶ Horsfall, 1904, 2–3. ⁷⁷ Eberstadt, 1917, 181. ⁷⁸ Ibid. 189, 197.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 431–3. ⁸⁰ Abercrombie, 1914, 219. ⁸¹ Bauer, 1934, 21; Purdom, 1921, 111.

⁸² Eberstadt, 1917, 214. ⁸³ Spengler, 1934, II. 102.

years is just the problem of . . . a characteristic *physical* type of town dweller: stunted, narrow-chested, easily wearied; yet voluble, excitable, with little ballast or endurance – seeking stimulus in drink, in betting, in any unaccustomed conflicts at home and abroad.⁸⁴

Similarly, in Germany in the 1920s *die Angst vor der Stadt* was a fear of social decomposition, suggested by evidence of suicide, alcoholism and venereal disease, 'excessive rationality' and lack of political stability.⁸⁵

New York: The Tumour in the Tenements

Overall, Andrew Lees concludes in his monumental study of nineteenth-century urban attitudes, fear and dislike of the city were very much an Anglo-German phenomenon: 'Few Americans displayed the vitriolic dislike of urban living as such that permeated much of the German literature'; yet 'many men and women articulated a keen awareness of the moral blemishes that disfigured the face of the American as well as the European city'.⁸⁶ Such fears were openly, even obsessively, expressed in the New York of the 1890s. There, a traditional Jeffersonian concern, that the city was 'pestilential to the morals, the health and the liberties of men', a cancer or tumour on the body social and the body politic, was fuelled by industrialization and immigration: New York became the greatest city of immigrants in the world, with 'half as many Italians as Naples, as many Germans as Hamburg, twice as many Irish as Dublin and two and a half times as many Jews as Warsaw'.⁸⁷

The intellectuals were unanimous on the result. Henry James wrote that 'New York was both squalid and gilded, to be fled rather than enjoyed'.⁸⁸ Many came to accept the judgement of Josiah Strong, in 1885, that to the city was traceable every danger that threatened American democracy: poverty and crime, socialism and corruption, immigration and Catholicism.⁸⁹ Alan Forman, in the *American Magazine* in 1885, wrote of 'a seething mass of humanity, so ignorant, so vicious, so depraved that they hardly seem to belong to our species', so that it was 'almost a matter for congratulation that the death rate among the inhabitants of these tenements is something over fifty-seven per cent'.⁹⁰ In 1892, no less authoritative a journal than the *New York Times* complained about the invasion of 'the physical, moral and mental wrecks' from Europe, 'of a kind which we are better without'.⁹¹ Even the *American Journal of Sociology*, in 1897, was forced to concede the power of the 'popular belief' that 'large cities are great centers of social corruption and . . . degeneration'.⁹² F. J. Kingsbury in 1895 was moved

⁸⁴ Masterman, 1901, 7–8. ⁸⁵ Peltz-Dreckmann, 1978, 62–3; Lees, 1979, 65–6.

⁸⁶ Lees, 1985, 164. ⁸⁷ Schlesinger, 1933, 73. ⁸⁸ White and White, 1962, 17, 75, 218.

⁸⁹ Gelfand, 1975, 18. ⁹⁰ Ford, 1936, 174. ⁹¹ Lubove, 1962b, 53–4.

⁹² Boyer, 1978, 129.

to comment that 'one would think after reading all this about the evils of cities from the time of Cain to the last New York election that nothing short of the treatment applied to Sodom and Gomorrah will meet the necessities of the case'.⁹³

The man who above all gave expression to these feelings was Jacob Riis: a rural-born Dane who emigrated to New York in 1870, at the age of twenty-one, and became a journalist seven years later. His *How the Other Half Lives*, published in 1890, created a sensation uncannily similar to the impact of *The Bitter Cry* on London seven years earlier.⁹⁴ It too was a brilliant piece of journalism. Its descriptions of tenement slum life skilfully combined two contemporary fears: the city as a kind of parasite on the body of the nation, and the immigrant as corrupter of American racial purity and social harmony. These new immigrants, 'beaten men from beaten races; representing the worst failures in the struggle for existence',⁹⁵ became a threat to order and to the very future of the Republic, recalling the earlier New York City riots of 1863:

The sea of a mighty population, held in galling fetters, heaves uneasily in the tenements. Once already our city, to which have come the duties and responsibilities of metropolitan greatness before it was able to fairly measure its task, has felt the swell of its relentless flood. If it rise once more, no human power may avail to check it.⁹⁶

But now the tenements had spread,

Crowding out all the lower wards, wherever business leaves a foot of ground unclaimed; strung along both rivers, like ball and chain that is tied to the foot of every street, and filling up Harlem with their restless, pent-up multitudes, they hold within their clutch the wealth and business of New York, hold them at their mercy in the day of mob-rule and wrath. The bullet-proof shelters, the stacks of hand-grenades, and the Gatling guns of the sub-Treasury are tacit admissions of the fact and of the quality of the mercy expected. The tenements today are New York, harboring three-fifths of its population.⁹⁷

A Tenement House Commission of 1894 estimated that nearly three in five of the city's population lived in tenement houses, so grossly over-built that on average nearly four-fifths of the ground was covered in buildings.⁸ In these tenement districts, two factors combined to create an acute human problem. First, the incomers were desperately poor and – because of language and cultural barriers – hopelessly immobile. The American planner and housing expert, Charles Abrams, who had the rare authority of having grown up in a tenement, later explained: 'the landlord cannot

⁹³ cit. Cook, 1973, 11. ⁹⁴ Lubove, 1962b, 55–7. ⁹⁵ cit. *ibid.* 54.

⁹⁶ Riis, 1890, 296. ⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 19–20. ⁹⁸ Ford, 1936, 187–8.

be blamed; the builder cannot be blamed. They built to meet a market. The market was determined by what the tenant could pay. What the tenant could pay was determined by the wages he received.⁹⁹

If the poor immigrant had not had such an apartment, he would have had nothing. And poor families crowded into them because they were within walking distance of jobs. Nearly 75 per cent of the Russian Jews were packed into three city wards and especially into one, the 10th, which contained a majority from (or with parents from) Russia and Russian Poland. By 1893, with more than 700 people to the acre, this ward was well over 30 per cent more crowded than the most congested part of any European city; part of the adjacent 11th Ward, with nearly 1,000 to the acre, was even more congested than the worst district of Bombay, and so was almost certainly the most crowded urban neighbourhood in the world – though, ironically, in the mid-1980s some parts of Hong Kong well exceed it.¹⁰⁰

Secondly, they crowded into tenements that, as in Berlin, perversely resulted from a so-called improved housing design: developed in a competition in 1879, the notorious dumb-bell tenement allowed twenty-four families to be crowded on to a lot 25 feet wide and 100 feet deep, with ten out of fourteen rooms on each floor having access only to an almost lightless (and airless) lightwell.¹⁰¹ Not infrequently, two families crowded into each of these wretched apartments; in 1908, a census of East Side families suggested that half slept at three or four people to a room, nearly a quarter at five or more to a room; they depended on a few communal taps, and fixed baths were non-existent.¹⁰² Thus an ordinary street block could house 4,000 people, and in 1900 some 42,700 Manhattan tenements housed more than 1.5 million people, at an average of nearly thirty-four to each building.¹⁰³

The reaction of respectable society – meaning older-established, White Anglo-Protestant Society – was up to a point identical to that in London. Two successive Tenement House Commissions, in 1894 and 1900, confirmed the evils of tenement-house living; the first achieved little, but the second was followed – after a huge political battle – by legislation in 1901, ‘the most significant regulatory act in America’s history of housing’, which outlawed the construction of further dumb-bells and compelled the modification of existing ones.¹⁰⁴ Its secretary, Lawrence Veiller, was a young man in his twenties, who had fought vested interests to get it set up.¹⁰⁵ His own view was that many of the city’s problems stemmed from the too sudden transition from European peasant to American urbanite,

⁹⁹ Abrams, 1939, 72–3. ¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 187; Scott, 1969, 10.

¹⁰¹ DeForest and Veiller, 1903, I. 101; Lubove, 1962b, 30–1. ¹⁰² Howe, 1976, 27.

¹⁰³ Glaab and Brown, 1976, 152. ¹⁰⁴ Ford, 1936, 205.

¹⁰⁵ Lubove, 1962b, 82–3, 90–3, 125–7, 132–9.

which he would propose to remedy via mass rural resettlement. But meanwhile, for those trapped in the city, urgent and drastic action was needed to redress the worst evils of tenement life: more light, more air, new bathrooms, better fire protection.¹⁰⁶

As Veiller described these evils, they were ‘almost beyond belief’:¹⁰⁷ in one block measuring a mere 200 by 400 feet were crowded thirty-nine tenement houses with 605 separate units, housing 2,781 people, with a mere 264 water-closets, and with not one bath among them; 441 rooms had no ventilation whatsoever, another 635 got theirs solely from narrow air shafts.¹⁰⁸ The 1894 Commission’s recommendations, which sought to prevent overbuilding, had been largely circumvented, Veiller wrote:

Unrestrained greed has gradually drawn together the dimensions of these tenements, until they have become so narrowed that the family life has become dissolved, and the members have been thrust out and scattered. The father is in the saloon; the youth team in procession up and down the lighted streets past concert halls and licensed dens of infamy; the boys rove in hordes in the alley, the girls in the rear yards. . . . The redemption of the tenement classes lies partly in the restoration of the family, the most conservative unit in civilization, to its proper share of space, natural light and air, and the cultivation of the domestic arts, one of which is personal cleanliness.¹⁰⁹

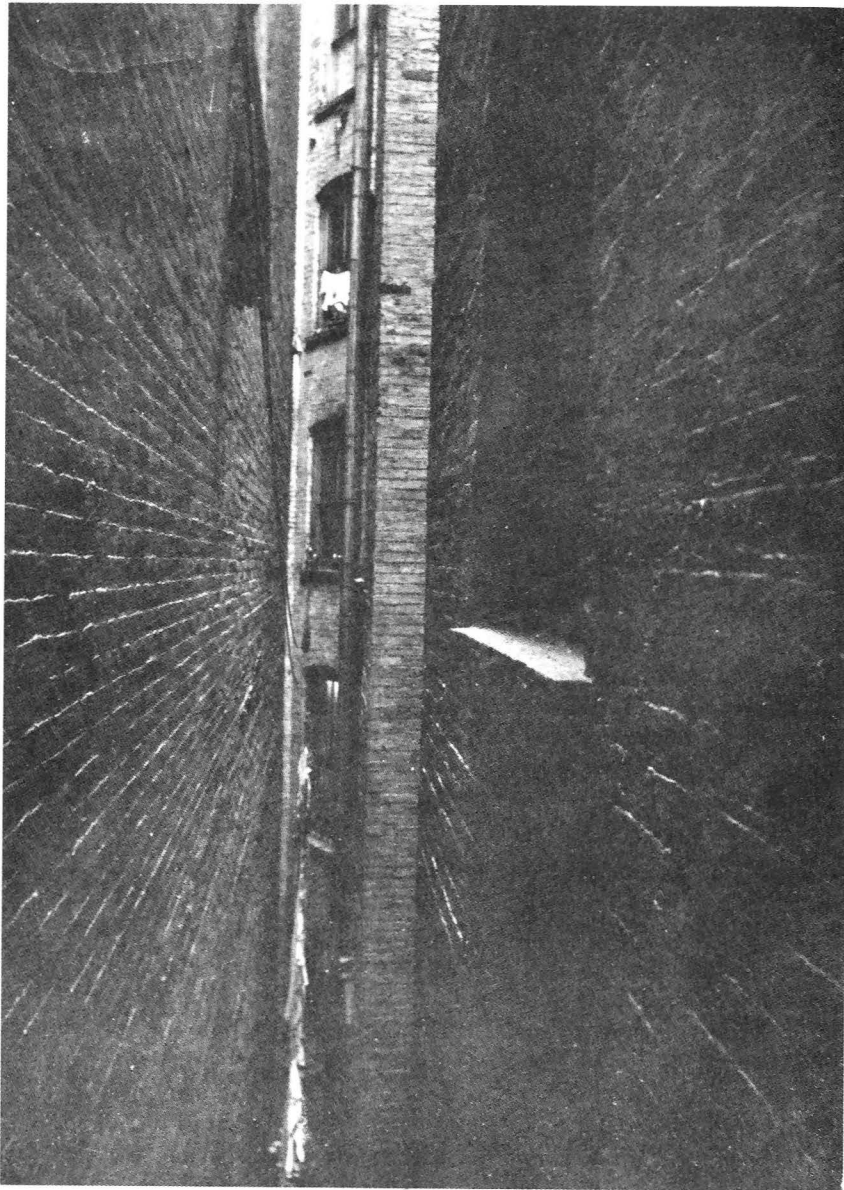
The Commissioners concluded:

The tenement districts of New York are places in which thousands of people are living in the smallest place in which it is possible for human beings to exist – crowded together in dark, ill-ventilated rooms, in many of which the sunlight never enters and in most of which fresh air is unknown. They are centres [*sic*] of disease, poverty, vice, and crime, where it is a marvel, not that some children grow up to be thieves, drunkards and prostitutes, but that so many should ever grow up to be decent and self-respecting.¹¹⁰

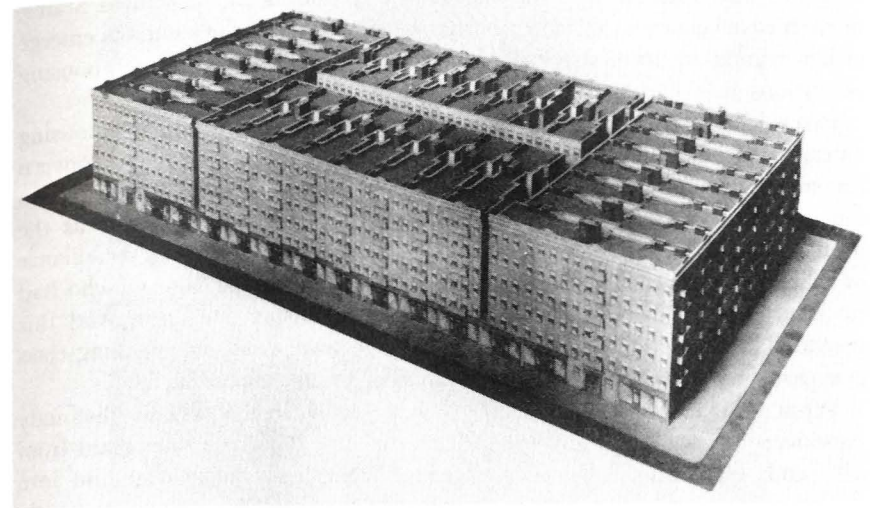
So there was a huge problem; on that, the Commission was at one with the British Royal Commission of 1885. But, when it came to solutions, Veiller and his commissioners sharply diverged from the British – and indeed the European – road. They looked at the London model of public housing, and decisively rejected it. ‘No good purpose could be thereby served,’ they concluded: at most, municipal housing would ‘better the living conditions of a favored few’ and ‘would furnish no better demonstration than private benevolence has furnished in the past and can be relied upon to furnish in the future’; there would be no way to determine ‘where should the wage line be drawn between those for whom they should and those for whom they should not provide.’¹¹¹ Besides, they felt, public housing would

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 131–4. ¹⁰⁷ DeForest and Veiller, 1903, I. 112. ¹⁰⁸ Ibid. I. 112–13.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. I. 435. ¹¹⁰ Ibid. I. 10. ¹¹¹ Ibid. I. 44.



FIGURES 2.5 AND 2.6 *New York Dumbbells (Old Law Tenements)*. As in Berlin, so in New York, another 'improved' housing design perversely brings no light, no air, but instead monumental overcrowding.



mean a ponderous bureaucracy, political patronage, the discouragement of private capital. So it was to be resisted: physical regulation of the private developer was to provide the answer. The 1901 Act, meticulously divided into more than 100 detailed sections, codified space standards, fire protection, plumbing provision.¹¹² Perhaps, in the conditions of the time and the place, that was a realistic judgement; though soon, other housing reformers – Edith Elmer Wood, Frederick Ackerman – were beginning to take issue with it. Whatever the case, in comparison with Europe, it was to set the cause of public housing back for decades, as Catherine Bauer was to bemoan in the 1930s.¹¹³

The reasons have intrigued historians. For they entailed a divorce in America between the infant arts of planned housing and planned cities. Early American planning, as will emerge in chapter 6, was dominated by the City Beautiful movement, and that was planning without social purpose – or even with a regressive one: the zoning movement, which profoundly influenced the subsequent course of American suburban development, was, if anything, socially exclusionary in its purpose and its impact. Regional plans, like the celebrated New York Regional Plan of

¹¹² Friedman, 1968, 33–5, 76.

¹¹³ Lubove, 1962b, 178–9, 182–3.

1931, were largely concerned with better housing for those that could afford to pay. Thus, 'housing, proclaimed as a major concern at the beginning of each of three milestones in the evolution of planning in the United States, in each case becomes joined with other issues; in each case solutions emerge either unrelated to housing or in fact aggravating those very housing conditions that had seemed to beget the effort.'¹¹⁴

Peter Marcuse's explanation is that of the three reasons why housing emerged as an issue – externalities like fire and disease dangers, concern for social order, and the protection of real estate values – the first two faded after 1910, as public health and fire control improved and as the immigrants were assimilated; thence, planning depended only on 'the alliance of real estate interests with middle-income home-owning voters', who had no interest whatsoever in programmes for rehousing the poor. And this provided a sharp contrast with Europe, where a strong working-class consciousness allied with an interventionist bureaucracy.¹¹⁵

What did emerge, in its place, was something odd and distinctly American: a voluntary movement dedicated to saving the immigrant from his (and, especially, her) own errors and excesses, socializing him into American folkways, and adjusting him to city life. The oddity lies partly in the fact that the idea was borrowed from Europe, and specifically from London's East End. There, a host of social endeavours had developed during the 1870s and 1880s to bring Christian morality and clean habits to the people of the slums. Jane Addams, on her first visit to England at the age of twenty-two, was profoundly affected by the publication of *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*. On a second trip, in June 1888, she just as providentially heard of Toynbee Hall, Canon Samuel Barnett's Christian settlement in St Jude's in East London, the 'worst parish in London'. The next year, she embarked on establishing a similar settlement in Chicago. Located at the middle of four poor immigrant communities – Italian, German, Jewish, Bohemian – Hull House was staffed by idealistic, college-educated young people, almost all female and highly religious. The kind of young woman who earlier would have become a missionary or tried to save a drunken husband, a newspaper reporter wrote, would now go into the settlement house.¹¹⁶ Some observers, as a result, found the atmosphere insufferable: Thorstein Veblen wrote of 'punctilios of upper-class propriety', Sinclair Lewis of 'cultural comfort-stations . . . upholding a standard of tight-smiling prissiness'.¹¹⁷ Their clientele, too, were chiefly female: a male immigrant later recalled that 'we went there for an occasional shower, that was all'.¹¹⁸ They dispensed continuing education for early school-leavers, summer camps to take children back to nature or playgrounds for those

¹¹⁴ Marcuse, 1980, 38. ¹¹⁵ Ibid. 40–9. ¹¹⁶ Davis, 1967, 37.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 17. ¹¹⁸ Ibid. 88.



FIGURE 2.7 Jane Addams.

The face of compassion and do-goodism, ready to battle for the bodies and souls of Chicago's slumdwellers.

who stayed behind, an old people's club (designed to break down their prejudice against the immigrants), a boarding club for girls, a programme to save 'fallen women', and a day nursery. They also pursued social inquiries consciously modelled on the Booth survey, and worked for reform of the labour laws.¹¹⁹ Finally, they campaigned against the gin-palace:

These coarse and illicit merrymakings remind one of the unrestrained jollities of Restoration London, and they are indeed their direct descendants, properly commercialized, still confusing joy with lust, and gaiety with debauchery.¹²⁰

Years later, after a decade of prohibition had brought mayhem to the streets of Chicago, she still warmly supported it, suggesting that the answer was to disarm the gangsters.¹²¹

It seems touching. Visitors from Britain – the Warden of Toynbee Hall, John Burns – were puzzled at the evident lack of any municipal intervention:

¹¹⁹ Addams, 1910, 41–2, 69, 85–9, 98–9, 121, 105–8, 129–31, 136, 146, 169, 198–230; Davis, 1967, 45, 58–9, 61–2, 85.

¹²⁰ Addams, 1965, 87. ¹²¹ Addams, 1929, 54–5.

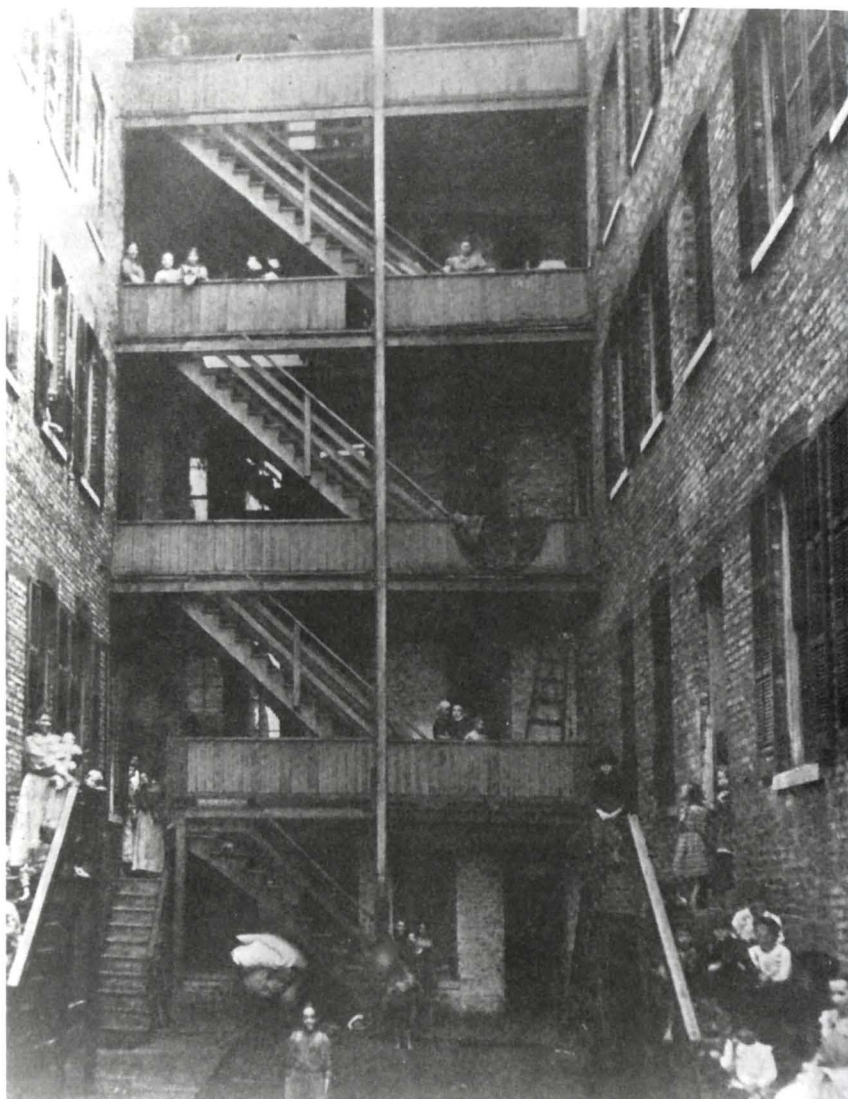


FIGURE 2.8 AND 2.9 *Chicago tenement life, ca. 1900.*
The immigrant mothers and their children await the reformer from Hull House.



the condition of the houses, where immigrants followed rural folkways in the middle of the city – slaughtering sheep and baking bread in basements – would have made them quite illegal in London, they exclaimed.¹²² But the Hull House programme was only an especially idealistic, and exceptionally well-publicized, variant of what was happening in every American city before World War One: there were six such centres in the United States in 1891, more than 100 by 1900, more than 400 by 1910.¹²³ The objective was to integrate the immigrant into the city, first by individual moral example, secondly – if that should fail – through moral coercion and even, so some supporters believed, segregation or repatriation of ‘the tramp, the drunkard, the pauper, the imbecile’.¹²⁴ But, thirdly, these were to be accompanied by a systematic upgrading of the urban environment, through parks and playgrounds and eventually through a wider system of city parks which – so argued the father of American landscape architecture, Frederick Law Olmsted – would exert a ‘harmonizing and refining influence . . . favorable to courtesy, self-control and temperance’.¹²⁵ Some supporters went further, arguing for neighbourhood revival as a way of restoring the quality of urban life, though Jane Addams herself would have none of such ‘geographical salvation’.¹²⁶ And from this grew the notion that the city itself could engender civic loyalty, thus guaranteeing a harmonious moral order; the city’s physical appearance would symbolize its moral purity. This became the central tenet of the City Beautiful movement.¹²⁷ Whether it made an adequate substitute for planned public housing, no one apparently thought to ask those most directly affected. In practical terms, Jane Addams followed the Lawrence Veiller prescription: she played a key role in launching Robert Hunter’s inquiry into Chicago tenement housing, the exact equivalent of the New York report, which revealed equally horrifying conditions and resulted in a tenement-house ordinance of 1902.¹²⁸

An International Problem

The remedies then were different. But the problem, and the perception of it, were similar on both sides of the Atlantic. The problem was the giant city itself. The perception of it was the source of multiple social evil, possible biological decline and potential political insurrection. From 1880 to 1900, perhaps 1914, middle-class society – the decision-makers, the leader-writers, the pamphleteers, the activists – was running scared. Much of this fear was grotesquely exaggerated, some of it deliberately so by practised

¹²² Addams, 1910, 295–5. ¹²³ Davis, 1967, 11–12. ¹²⁴ Ibid 92; Boyer, 1978, 191.

¹²⁵ Boyer, 1978, 239. ¹²⁶ Davis, 1967, 76.

¹²⁷ Boyer, 1978, 252. ¹²⁸ Hunter, 1901, *passim*; Davis, 1967, 67.

self-publicists. But the underlying reality was horrific enough, and it stemmed from poverty. The rich might, through revolution, have given to the poor; it would not have done anyone much good, for there was all too little to go around. That poverty had been endemic since the beginnings of society, but in the countryside it could be more or less hidden; once concentrated in the city, it was revealed. The poor who crowded from Wessex or East Anglia into London, from Italy and Poland into New York, were actually better off than they had been on the land; or at least, they thought they were, and they were in the best position to know.

The difference then lay in the fact of concentration, whereby some thousands of the rich and some millions of the middle classes were brought into close contact with millions of the poor and very poor. In this sense industrialization and urbanization, as the Marxists always say, did create a new set of social relationships and a new set of social perceptions. But that, as I argued in chapter 1, just states the obvious. Until 1883–5 in London and Liverpool, until 1900–1 in New York and Chicago, the urban bourgeoisie remained blissfully unaware of the horrific fate of their proletarian counterparts next door. After that, there could be no doubt. Veiller and Hunter described that fate all too graphically. Here is Veiller, interviewing a housewife from the tenements:

- The Secretary* What is the chief trouble with the tenement house in your experience?
Mrs. Miller – Well, there doesn’t seem to be any ‘chief’ about it. It seems to be about all trouble. In the first place, the way the tenements are run. Then the air shaft is the chief and greatest nuisance.
- The Secretary* – What is the trouble with the air shaft?
Mrs. Miller – It is a place of foul odors rather than air. For light, you get light on the top floor, but no place else, and the noises – I do not think it has a very good influence on the people.
- The Secretary* – In what way?
Mrs. Miller – Well, it is not very nice to be waked up in the middle of the night and hear someone yell out ‘Oh, that is down on the first floor. He has got delirium tremens again.’ Two houses kept awake by that man yelling. Boys and girls hear it and tease the children about it next day.¹²⁹

And here Hunter, describing life in the frame-house tenements of Chicago:

To cook and wash for seven, to nurse a crying baby broken out with heat, and to care for a delirious husband, to arrange a possible sleeping-place for seven, to do all these things in two rooms which open upon an alley, tremulous with heated odors and swarming with flies from the garbage and manure boxes, was something to tax the patience and strength of a Titan.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ DeForest and Veiller, 1903, I. 404.

¹³⁰ Hunter, 1901, 63.

The problem, then, was well-nigh universal. The question for historians must be why, given the similarity of the underlying economic structures and the resulting social relationships in the leading industrial countries around 1900, the subsequent urban outcomes should be so different. That is a question that will recur in the following chapters.

The City of By-Pass Variegated

And the newness of everything! The raw, mean look! Do you know the look of these new towns that have suddenly swelled up like balloons in the last few years, Hayes, Slough, Dagenham and so forth? The kind of chilliness, the bright red brick everywhere, the temporary-looking shopfronts, full of cut-price chocolates and radio parts.

George Orwell

Coming up for Air (1939)

Come, friendly bombs, and fall on Slough
It isn't fit for humans now,
There isn't grass to graze a cow
Swarm over, Death!

Come, bombs and blow to smithereens
Those air-conditioned, bright canteens,
Tinned fruit, tinned meat, tinned milk, tinned beans
Tinned minds, tinned breath.

Mess up the mess they call a town –
A house for ninety-seven down
And once a week for half-a-crown
For twenty years . . .

John Betjeman

'Slough' (*Continual Dew*) (1937)